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GREENWAY**

PROFILE: BIKES BELONG



East Coast Greenway

Story and photos by Karen Votava

This article was originally published in the April issue of *Adventure Cyclist*, the membership magazine of Adventure Cycling Association. For more info, visit adventurecycling.org/adventure-cyclist.



“A bike path 3,000 miles long! Canada to Key West! No way!” Only minutes into our two-week journey from Wilmington, Delaware, to New York City, we paused on a pedestrian bridge over the Brandywine River to admire the historic Bancroft Mill complex, and met our first fellow trail users. A pair of seniors (like ourselves) were out for a day of cycling on the Northern Delaware Greenway, a paved trail winding through a series of parks carved from former private estates. Their eyes lit up to learn that their hometown bike path was part of the East Coast Greenway (ECG), a 3,000-mile traffic-free trail being established along the Eastern Seaboard.

Some background: In the fall of 1991, I was among a group of nine who met in New York City to found the East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA). Our goal was to spearhead implementation of this bold vision for a Maine-to-Florida bike path. I had a personal stake in seeing this vision realized in that it could expand cycling possibilities right in our backyard. But I also had a professional interest. As director of open space planning for the New York City Planning Department, I served as chief author of the 1993 Greenway Plan for New York City, a blueprint for 350 miles of bicycle trails crisscrossing America’s largest city (now largely implemented). It was a short leap to envision linking New York City’s greenway system to a route that would connect people from New York to destinations as far north as Maine or south all the way to Florida.

Our vision was to link local trails to form a largely off-road pathway, slicing through cities and towns and stretching from Canada to Key West. It should go directly through downtowns, linking population centers with popular destinations. It would serve users of all abilities, traveling by many modes — recreational cyclists, families with kids, walkers, folks in wheelchairs, on horseback, or on skates. It would offer a unique opportunity to discover, at a leisurely pace, a part of America full of history, culture, architecture spanning several centuries, industrial ruins, and stunning natural landscapes.

Serving for 15 years as the executive director of the East Coast Greenway Alliance, I have long dreamed of cycling the entire route of the ECG. Now retired, I found the 20th anniversary of the ECGA’s

founding to be the perfect moment to begin my personal pilgrimage. It would be a chance to assess what had been accomplished over the past two decades to put this route in place. And it could inspire less adventurous cyclists by showing that public transportation could enable them to cover a longer distance, skipping over more challenging terrain. We wanted to test how well public transportation would work as an adjunct to bicycle travel, especially with heavily loaded bikes. Bike-accessible commuter rail allowed us to reach our departure point in Wilmington without using our car, starting from our small apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

For accommodations we were not going to rough it with camping and hostels. We’d use low-cost hotels and bed down with friends. And we also wanted to try out airbnb.com, a new B&B service we’d read about that seemed like a good way to find friendly accommodations close to biking routes (most franchise hotels tend to be on busy highways, away from the ECG route.) With the ECG more



complete in the Mid-Atlantic region, there would be more miles of trail to experience. And there was the richness of the built environment along this most urbanized stretch of the greenway, its detail lost to people speeding along I-95. Hidden to them is the wealth of history, culture, and ethnic dining options just off the highway.

“3,000 miles is a lot of cycling,” said my



husband Bob as we discussed this venture last December, relaxing before a fire in our southern Rhode Island home. “Let’s do it a bit at a time. We’re not aiming to click off the miles — we want a gentle, unhurried ride, consistent with our status as seniors!” Our plan was to take 12 days to travel from Wilmington, Delaware, to New York City, folding in three days of downtime to see Philadelphia and two days exploring a spur trail, the Schuylkill River Trail.

Riding the rails to our starting point, we got our first chance to test the public transportation–bicycle fit. A mile from our start in Park Slope, Brooklyn, we used a street-side elevator on Pacific Street to take us and our bikes to the subway platform below. There, we boarded the #2 subway to

reach Penn Station in Manhattan where we caught a New Jersey Transit commuter train to Trenton. “No one even seemed to notice us” said Bob. “You would think loaded bike tourists were an everyday sight in the city.”

After a change of trains in Trenton, from New Jersey Transit to Philadelphia’s Septa line, we were on our way to 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. There we changed yet again to the Septa train that would take us to Wilmington. Elevators existed for all level changes except one on the route from Penn Station to Wilmington, and thanks to excellent connections, it took only three and a half hours! (Sadly, Amtrak does not yet accommodate bikes on their Northeast Corridor route.)

The Northern Delaware Greenway

On a day that began with rain but soon brightened, we headed out on our loaded bikes from the Doubletree Hotel on King Street and followed it a few blocks north along the on-street ECG route to the Brandywine River. Just after crossing a bridge we passed our first ECG trail marker, directing us to turn left into Brandywine Park, one of a number of parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted that we would visit along our route. Here in the Brandywine Gorge, begins the nine-mile-long Northern Delaware Greenway, which would take us close to the Pennsylvania border. The trail

followed the river past the Brandywine Zoo. Above towered a forest of stately trees, and the stone and steel arches of a series of venerable highway and rail bridges soared overhead. Only blocks from downtown Wilmington, the landscape verged on wildness, but it was also studded with the remnants of its industrial past, including a series of mill buildings now converted to upscale condos. After crossing a delicate pedestrian suspension bridge, the route soon moved on to the street. It climbed past a series of handsome early 20th-century homes once belonging to magnates of an earlier era and the Delaware Museum of Art, before dropping down to the river and re-entering the off-road trail. “I thought the ECG was flat,” mumbled Bob as we puffed up one of the few hills of the entire trip along the trail as it climbed the northern bank of the Brandywine. The ECG is actually a remarkably flat route, consisting largely of former rail corridors, riverfront paths, and canal towpaths. Sections still on



road can involve hills, but as new sections of trail are added, it will make for an ever gentler ride. “We could be in northern New Hampshire,” commented Bob from our perch on a large rock outcropping along the rushing water of the creek. We were enjoying a picnic lunch, amused by the cavorting of several strange gray squirrels

with white tail tips. We continued along the asphalt pathway, a curvy, hilly route through stands of mature trees, and passed several old mansions now part of this state park, including Rockford and Bellevue Houses. Arriving at Cauffield House at the end of the trail, the woods opened to reveal the Delaware River in the distance below. Coasting down to the river level, we

followed the Governor Printz Boulevard a few miles to the Claymont Septa train station. With an early-evening appointment in Philadelphia, we chose to skip cycling the (currently) largely on-road route into the city. This was the only time we had to carry our bikes down and up — through a tunnel — to the northbound track. A short, raised platform at the front of the train accommodated wheelchair users (the American’s with Disabilities Act legislation aimed at serving the disabled has been a boon to cyclists). This platform enabled us to enter the train with our bikes easily, although it meant we entered through the engineer’s cabin. “Not a problem,” the courteous engineer said as he helped us maneuver our loaded bikes through the handicapped area of the passenger compartment.

“How nice, another elevator to the street!” Bob murmured as we exited at the University City Septa stop near the University of Pennsylvania. There, we joined students and commuters heading home from downtown Philadelphia along a well-marked bike lane, cycling about two miles to spend the night in West Philadelphia with an old ECGA colleague and friend, Alice Wells. Alice had been among the movers and shakers who launched the ECG in its early days and is part of Philadelphia’s active and effective bicycle advocacy community.

Philadelphia has faced many obstacles to moving the ECG route off-road. Although the city had a number of excellent bike paths in place when the idea of an ECG was born, only a short section of the Schuylkill River Trail has worked into the routing for the ECG. But, with the leadership of Bob Thomas, an architect and bike-path planner based in Philadelphia, and the assistance of many other organizations, agencies, and volunteers, a largely off-road route is gradually developing. In five years, much of it will be in place.

The Schuylkill River Trail

The ECG links to many spur trails that expand bicycle touring opportunities. Because I’ve long wanted to cycle the Schuylkill River Trail (SRT), we set off early in the morning on a two-day journey, planning a stop overnight in Valley Forge, a modest 20.5 miles each way, leaving plenty of time to enjoy the sights en route. We departed from downtown, across from the 30th Street Amtrak station on a newly completed southerly extension of the SRT (it will soon bring the ECG farther south to



historic Bartram’s Garden, the 1728 home of America’s first botanist). Hugging the river, this paved trail, virtually all off-road, is heavily used by a mix of cyclists, skaters, walkers, runners, and other more passive users such as artists with their easels. It serves commuters, is a recreational venue for families, and is Philadelphia’s most popular route for racing cyclists. This mix of users presents challenges, demonstrating the need to enforce speed limits on bike paths nationwide. We witnessed a speeding cyclist almost

collide with a toddler in a stroller. Passing under the Benjamin Franklin Parkway Bridge, a feast of architectural styles stretched before us. Rising on our right was the massive Beaux-Arts style Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts. Shortly, on the left along the river, came the historic mid-19th-century Fairmount Water Works complex, a notable collection of neoclassical style structures. Soon Boat House Row appeared, a series of buildings belonging to college and private crew clubs and offering

Nuts & Bolts: Delaware to New York City

Our Trip Statistics: Eight total cycling days, 23.5 average miles per day, 188 total miles cycled (99 miles on paved trail, 45 miles on unpaved trail, 44 on road).

Getting there & away: We began in Wilmington. Our route closely follows the Amtrak (not bike accessible) and Southeast Pennsylvania Transportation Authority and New Jersey Transit lines (bike accessible). Philadelphia Airport serves Wilmington. The New York airports serve to access the north end.

Equipment/gear: To ride unpaved trails, a bike with 28 to 38 millimeter smooth-tread tires is recommended, although standard road bike tires can suffice.

Accommodations & services: As an urban route, it’s replete with food, bike shops, and accommodations, although Wilmington had no B&Bs and only pricier hotels close to the start point. Advance reserva-



tions are advised. We used Airbnb (airbnb.com) for three nights, a home exchange, a stay with a friend in Philadelphia, hotels on three nights, hostels in Philadelphia and New York City. Camping may be possible but a challenge to locate near the trail.

Bike rental: Bike and Roll rentals in New York City can be taken on the train to Wilmington and returned at the end (bike newyorkcity.com).

Intermodal transportation used: Two ferry crossings, one subway, six commuter train segments for the round trip journey.

When to go: Spring and fall are the best times to ride. Summer can be hot and humid. Fall means shorter days but less chance of rain.

Advice & precautions: Services are ample but carry water, and take bug spray and

sun screen. Prepare for heat and humidity in summer and traffic on some of the longer unfinished road sections (we cut them out by using trains.)

Expenses: Total cost for two was \$1,700, including an extra three days spent in Philadelphia, for a total of 12 days. Trains were half-fare for seniors, free in Philadelphia. Airbnb average cost: \$60/night. The chief expense for us was food.

Maps & wayfinding tools: Spiral bound maps with cue sheets for the entire route (two separate volumes, one for Pennsylvania and Delaware and one for New Jersey) are available at ECGA online: greenway.org. The route is also mapped on Google Maps and cue sheets posted on ECGA’s website. New Jersey is very well signed with ECG markers. We used our iPhone GPS program frequently to clarify routing. Developing an app for mobile devices is ECGA’s goal for 2013.



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a playful mix of diverse architectural styles. Scores of high-school crew teams from around the country were setting up for the colorful, annual Stotesbury Cup high-school rowing regatta weekend. The trail continued through a series of historic mill towns. Among the many dining options, we chose to lunch at a funky taquería, then continued on to Valley Forge, which we reached in late afternoon.

With a night of rest at a local motel, we began exploring Valley Forge Historic Park. Under the management of the National Park Service, this expansive landscape with its sweeping meadows is reminiscent of an English country garden. Our bikes enabled us to cover it all in a few hours. We paid a symbolic visit to George Washington at the house where he spent the winter of 1777-78, a year after his crossing of the Delaware River, and picnicked at Varnum Hill, where our Rhode Island troops wintered. Then we retraced our route back to Philadelphia.

After several days prowling Philadelphia's historic streets on foot and feasting on its cultural riches (the new Barnes Collection building was just opening on Benjamin Franklin Parkway), we put our bikes on New Jersey's new River Line light rail in Camden to reach the Trenton area.

After overnighting in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, we set off the next morning, following a canal towpath toward the Calhoun Street Bridge, which suddenly loomed before us. This historic iron truss bridge, a fragile-looking structure that crosses the Delaware River to New Jersey, was constructed by the Phoenix Bridge Company in 1884. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it was completely restored in 2010, including a fresh coat of soft green paint and re-decking of the narrow wooden pedestrian walkway. Dismounting, we paused to survey the broad and slow-moving Delaware River flowing under us from the north. To the south rose the golden dome of the New Jersey State House.

New Jersey's D&R Canal Towpath

The Delaware & Raritan Canal, now part of a New Jersey state park, is a system of canals built in the early 1800s to transport coal from the Pennsylvania fields to Philadelphia and New York City. The D&R Canal Trail, stretching from Trenton to New Brunswick, is one of the few links in the ECG that existed back in 1991. By constituting more than half of the connection

between Philadelphia and New York City, it was an inspiration for the ECG vision.

We entered the canal towpath soon after crossing the Calhoun Street Bridge. At first, the path was narrow, rough, and glass-strewn, a reflection of the city itself, still struggling with poverty and abandonment, a far cry from its heyday as a capital of industry. That industry is mostly gone, although a sign on its Lower Trenton Bridge still claims, "Trenton Makes, the World Takes."

Following the towpath as it snaked through Trenton, we paused to gaze up at a statue of George Washington on a tall column adjacent to the route. A short detour took us to the nearby historic Trenton Barracks where guides dressed in period costume shared the story of Washington's historic crossing of the Delaware River and the Battle of Trenton, where Washington defeated Cornwallis, a turning point in the Revolutionary War.

The rough route through Trenton soon turned into a smooth new asphalt path. Then it turned again to stone dust for the remainder of the 34.3 miles into New Brunswick, the route's condition varying according to the effects of recent weather. To Princeton and for a number of miles beyond, there were a lot of soft, muddy, puddled areas. Although the state tries to resurface this pathway, storms sometimes cause serious washouts. It is an ongoing struggle. For those wanting a hard surface, there is a nearby on-road route shown on the ECGA New Jersey map, but you would miss the bucolic experience of coasting under the leafy green tree canopy of the towpath. This was a special treat in early summer with the fragrant aromas of roses and honeysuckle that line the trail. Wildlife abounded. Occasionally, muskrats skittered into the bushes, families of ducks floated by, flocks of Canada geese encroached on the trail, dozens of turtles perched on logs, and in one spot, three snakes wound themselves in a ball on a tree branch, catching the early-morning sun.

We rolled into Princeton around noon and indulged ourselves with generous-sized hamburgers and mugs of draft beer at the Witherspoon Grill. The afternoon was consumed with exploring the main Princeton University campus, inspecting some of the newer architecture that has led to college campuses recently racking up large debts, and taking a brief peek into the excellent (and free) Princeton University Art Museum.

We had our first Airbnb experience that

evening near the campus when we stayed in a comfortable room in university housing built in the late 1940s for returning GIs. Our hostess was a graduate student in molecular biology, and we got acquainted that evening in her kitchen over Chinese take-out.

We set off the next morning to complete our journey on the D&R towpath. It appeared to have relatively low usage except when it ran close to population centers like Princeton and New Brunswick. Because the unpaved surface eliminates fast cyclists who favor paved trails, we saw mostly walkers, many out with their dogs. We came upon a group of elderly walkers, members of a club that meets every Wednesday, dressed in serious hiking garb with walking sticks, and pants tucked into socks to deter ticks. The trail improved considerably after a few miles with a new stone dust surface stretching all the way to the trail's terminus in New Brunswick. Crossing the Raritan River to Highland Park we arrived at our second Airbnb overnight, the upper floors of a large frame house. Our hosts were two welcoming young women, and a range of tempting restaurants was only a few blocks away.



Cycling through county parks to Newark

New Jersey has been the most aggressive state in promoting the development of the ECG under the remarkable leadership of the New Jersey Department of Transportation and its bicycle program manager, Sheree Davis, with strong advocacy by volunteers like Mike and Anne Kruimer. The entire ECG route across the state is completely signed and is, therefore, easy to follow. We followed a route designed with the help of

the state, which takes the ECG through this densely developed older urban/suburban part of northern New Jersey. It is an ingenious route, taking a series of existing pathways through county parks that were the vision of Olmsted in the early 20th century. New trails are still being added. We traversed Roosevelt Park, passed the Thomas A. Edison Memorial Tower, cycled through Nomahegan Park, and then entered the recently completed lush, green Lenape Park



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Trail, opened in October 2011. Although we did experience some on-road sections with heavy traffic (but with decent shoulders), for the most part the route wound its way through quiet residential neighborhoods. Much of it took a scenic course following the Rahway River, using park trails combined with local low-traffic streets to reach Newark.

Our overnight Airbnb stop in Newark was located on a side street adjacent to Olmsted's historic Weequahic Park. The street was alive with residents of all ages. Our B&B hostess, a young South African woman named Eliane, emerged from her townhouse and helped us park our bikes in the rear. We lugged our bags upstairs into her charming renovated apartment. Eliane is engaged in a project to develop a new green hotel near Weequahic Park, part of the rejuvenation of Newark.

Crossing the New Jersey Meadowlands

Traveling from Newark to New York City, the final day of our journey, proved to be the highlight of our trip. We were among the first to cycle a new piece of the ECG that I had thought I would not see in my lifetime. Pedaling through Newark

toward downtown, we made a Dunkin' Donuts breakfast stop. A pair of older men, truck drivers grabbing morning coffee, were amused. "Really, you cycled all the way from Wilmington?!" one said.

Newark's streets were in surprisingly good condition. But, as we pedaled along, we passed evidence of both decay and renewal, shuttered housing projects next to shiny new high schools. Deferred to a future trip were stops at the many notable institutions in downtown Newark: The New Jersey Institute of Technology, the Newark Museum, Newark Public Library, and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, as we pushed on to Newark's Penn Station with our goal of reaching Brooklyn by day's end.

The New Jersey Meadowlands separates Newark from Jersey City. Until now, only a few roads, none open to cyclists, offered a crossing aligned with the ECG route, so cyclists were required to take (bike-accessible) public transit from Newark's Penn Station to Jersey City (or New York City). But New Jersey's state bicycle program manager, Sheree Davis, was undaunted. She found more than a million dollars to upgrade the best option for cyclists: Route

1&9, an elevated truck route. It's four lanes of constant, fast-moving, heavy truck traffic, and a gritty and grimy artery. Thanks to her perseverance, a road-separated bike path of about four miles had just been completed. It's a concrete pathway edged by guard rails to protect cyclists from passing traffic. Using pre-existing walkways on the two bridges that cross the Passaic and Hackensack rivers, it passes though South Kearny in between. We were eager to be among the first persons to cycle it!

Leaving Newark's Penn Station, we followed the well-signed route along Ferry Street for several miles through the legendary Iron Bound District, home to Portuguese immigrants and now a huge Latino population. This lively street is lined with food markets and excellent ethnic restaurants. Suddenly, we found ourselves in a spaghetti tangle of elevated highways, as trucks entered and exited the Route 1&9 viaduct that also now serves cyclists and walkers. Excellent signage led us up a ramp, and we were surprised at how safe this route felt despite the heavy truck traffic just at our elbows. Being part of such a gritty industrial environment on a bicycle is part of what we all had envisioned back



in 1991 when we first advocated for an urban greenway system.

Once up on Route 1&9, spread before us was a spectacular view over the Jersey Meadowlands, a huge wetland fed by the Passaic and Hackensack rivers. For decades, it has been home to a fascinating mix of industrial and warehousing uses, truck depots, storage yards, jails, and myriad other activities excluded from

the adjacent residential neighborhoods. The Meadowlands is slowly being reclaimed for its natural qualities, but the built environment is what grabs your attention. Paralleling us on the north and dominating the scene was the Pulaski Skyway, a giant aging "erector set" viaduct that carries the car traffic for Route 1&9 across the Meadowlands. Bob's fascination with this feat of engineering elicited from me: "It

reminds me of the Eiffel Tower." Dating to the 1920s, and needing major investment, sadly it is now threatened with demolition.

Touching down in Jersey City's historic Lincoln Park, a pathway system took us back to city streets, and we headed upland through neighborhoods of brick townhouses and brownstones. Some areas were struggling and others had been gentrified, reflecting the resurgence that Jersey City, like so many American cities, is experiencing. After lunching across from City Hall at The Merchant, a quiet pub, we coasted down to the Hudson River waterfront where a public access walkway allows you to travel north to Hoboken or south to Liberty State Park, with phenomenal views of Lower Manhattan. Instead we chose to catch the ferry across the Hudson River to Lower Manhattan's World Financial Center in Battery Park City where we made a short stop at the Winter Garden. Climbing the marble interior steps, we surveyed the always sobering view of the Ground Zero site. Crowds flooded the 911 Memorial. Cranes were busily adding steel and glass to the 1,776-foot-tall Freedom Tower, now the

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tallest building in New York City. Rising skyward from its base at Ground Zero, the steely grayness of the Freedom Tower is an impressive sight. Its very existence is a tribute to the determination of New Yorkers to put the tragedy of 911 behind them.

We soon set off along the Route 9A bike path, a first-class dual bike/pedestrian pathway built 20 years ago as part of an at-grade boulevard replacing the old West Side Highway. It is part of the nearly complete water's edge pathway that allows you to cycle around Manhattan Island almost entirely on traffic-free paths. This is part of the grand commitment by the Bloomberg administration to bolster cycling in the city. It brought us to the Battery where we struggled through crowds of tourists past Battery Park, the entrances to the Statue of Liberty, Staten Island, and Governor's Island ferries, and picked up the East River Esplanade to continue northward. At Pier 11, south of the South Street Seaport, we caught the Ikea New York Waterways Ferry to Red Hook, Brooklyn. For five dollars, we got to view Brooklyn from this water vantage point. 15 minutes later, we stepped off the ferry, and our wheels touched down once again on

Brooklyn asphalt. In was only a short ride on local streets back to our start in Park Slope, to the little garage tucked behind a row of brownstones where we had parked our car. In three hours, we were home in Rhode Island.

Our trip demonstrated the excellent nexus between bikes and public transportation in this region and confirmed for me the enormous progress made over the past 20 years to move this audacious vision forward. With 27.5 percent of its 3,000 miles now off road, and an additional 18 percent at some level of development, this treasure demands to be discovered by bicycle travelers of all stripes. With 3,000 miles of fun to choose from, you might want to experience it yourself! **AC**

Karen Votava was a co-founder and the first Executive Director of the East Coast Greenway Alliance (ECGA) which spearheads establishment of the 3,000-mile trail linking cities from Maine to Florida. With a BA from Douglass College and a Master of City Planning from Yale University, her career was chiefly with the New York City Planning Department where she authored "A Greenway Plan for New York City," a blueprint for 350 miles of greenways, now largely implemented. She is an enthusiastic bicycle tourist and advocate for bicycle transportation. She currently lives in Rhode Island and is married with three grown daughters and three granddaughters.

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IN 2011, SUEPINDA KEITH AND HER HUSBAND, KEVIN HICKS, BROUGHT TOGETHER A GROUP OF HIGH-potential, lower-resourced teens and struck off along Adventure Cycling's Underground Railroad Bicycle Route from Mobile, Alabama, to Niagara Falls, New York. Kevin remembers, "We only camped out about three days in total. We stayed with station masters, people who put us up for the night."

"The tour was such a success we decided to try again in 2012 on a new route — Adventure Cycling's Lewis and Clark Bicycle Trail — but this time we included more camping and became a nonprofit. Our focus was to get low-income minority youth on bikes, exploring the great outdoors and national parks," Suepinda said. The group was challenged both mentally and physically, learning leadership skills Suepinda and Kevin believe will help the kids excel in college and throughout life, and both tours focused heavily on the history of the selected route.

"I learned that there were over 200 treaties between the Native American nations and the U.S. government; not one was honored," 17-year-old Jeimy remembers. "I got the chance to experience the effects of how the Native American identity has been transformed over the years."

"While there were a few instances of racism on both tours, they were minuscule in comparison to the overwhelming expressions of hospitality from whole towns to individuals," Kevin said.

So what does the future hold? The group is already planning their 2013 tour which will use Adventure Cycling's Great Rivers South maps as they ride along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to St. Louis, in conjunction with the National Network to Freedom.

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